

# CAPITOL STUFF

By TED LEWIS

Washington, March 22—It is only natural for us common people—because there are so many of us, as Lincoln said—to enjoy a chuckle or a sneer when executives of a big corporation show up to disadvantage in a most embarrassing way, as did various General Motors big shots at a Senate hearing today.

They were on the carpet at a subcommittee inquiry. The probe was ordered two weeks ago when it developed that GM had hired private investigators to come up with a dossier on the life and habits of one of the chief critics of the automotive industry's role in improving cars to make them safer, rather than faster.

The man shadowed was Ralph Nader, 31, a lawyer and a bachelor. Nader had written a book, "Unsafe at Any Speed," which GM didn't like because it made slighting references to the design of GM's 1960 and 1961 Corvair models.

There are 100 or more court suits pending based on claims that the Corvair, with its rear engine transmission, lacked certain safety factors. So it seemed a good idea for GM's general counsel, Aloysius F. Power, to put private eyes on Nader's trail last November to find out all about him, in particular to find out if he was in cahoots with litigants in the Corvair cases.

It turned out today during the hearing before the safety subcommittee headed by Sen. Abraham Ribicoff (D-Conn.) that the GM-ordered checkup on Nader gave the author a clean bill of health. This even extended to his sex habits, with the result that he was labeled "manly," definitely not anti-Semitic, and free from any taint of collusion with litigants in the Corvair cases.

It is not our intention to go into the details of the testimony at today's hearing. But there are two aspects of the hearing which are most intriguing and worth a little interpretation.

## GM's Bossman Didn't Know of Probe

In the first place, there was the lead-off testimony of GM President James M. Roche. Roche admitted that the entire Nader investigation "was initi-



(UPI Telefoto)

Ralph Nader listening to testimony at yesterday's hearing.

ated, conducted and completed without my knowledge or consent, and without the knowledge or consent of any member of our governing committees."

As a result, the president of GM did not know until a little more than two weeks ago that GM funds were being used by the corporation's general counsel to get the lowdown on author Nader.

It would seem that this is a helluva way to run any corporation—for the president to be totally ignorant of a delicate sleuthing operation which could, if it went awry, get GM into a mess with Congress at the very time the legislators were studying the pros and cons of highway safety.

This is a lesson in the need of concentration of vital policy decisions at the highest level of a corporation. It was a lesson that should have been learned impressively six years ago when General Electric's chairman, Ralph J. Cordiner, got into the Senate doghouse.

## Quality of Policy Decisions Is Wanting

At that time the Senate Kefauver committee was investigating the price-fixing scandal in the electrical equipment industry. Cordiner had to admit that he was not informed that some of his chief subordinates were quietly dividing up with "competitors" various lucrative contracts.

Sometimes it seems, as it does today in any analysis of General Motors' peculiar division of authority in the Nader case, that a huge corporation should know better than to get itself into such a box. GM makes excellent automobiles. Why then shouldn't it strive for excellence in policy decisions?

But in the process of straightening out its chain of command, it might also be wise for GM to protect itself from being the laughingstock of smart public relations men.

Nothing could be more ludicrous than the almost brazen, unimaginative way it decided that the lawyer who would sit next to President Roche today, and whisper advice concerning what to say under questioning, should be Theodore Sorensen.

Sorensen is the newest member—and has been a member for only a few weeks—of the New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison. This firm is the counsel of record in seven Corvair design cases in the New York area; it was retained by GM two years ago.

## JFK, Sorensen, Bobby and GM

Why was Sorensen, the freshman in the firm chosen to sit at Roche's right hand? Somebody in GM assumed this was a smart political move. Sorensen had been John F. Kennedy's White House counsel and confidante.

It is fair to assume that he was picked as legal adviser to GM at the Senate hearing for one reason only. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.) is a member of the Ribicoff committee.

Last fall, when Roche first appeared before the committee, the sharpest questions thrust at him were from Bobby. GM officials were most unhappy about Bobby's manner. They felt he was acting like a prosecuting attorney in a criminal case, and the way he snapped at Roche certainly gave the impression that he felt the GM president was accused of mayhem.

So Sorensen's presence on the GM bench would, it was obviously hoped, cause Bobby to treat the corporation's witness with more tolerance. But Kennedy remained firm in his sharp questioning on the side of Nader. Which is a reminder that Nader himself suggested recently that if private eyes were going to trail him, it made equally as much sense to trail Bobby. For the Senator, a month ago, referred to GM's Corvair in a public statement as "an example of irresponsible manufacturing design." Nader reminded